

John Boehner's Uneasy Crown

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“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” lamented Shakespeare's King Henry IV

There is good reason why US House Speaker John Boehner is uneasy these days. Not only must he fend off the ultra ideological Tea Party amateurs in his party but past history as well. Republican House members have a long history of offing the heads of their leaders. Multiple times since 1900, leaders of the House Republicans have been sent packing. In 1903, it was Republican Speaker David B. Henderson whose dalliance with a female lobbyist (rumored to have been the daughter of a US senator) sent him back to Iowa. Henderson's successor Speaker Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois lost his power to name committee members and his chairmanship of the House Rules Committee in 1910 when Progressive Republicans joined minority Democrats led by Missouri's Champ Clark to end Cannon's autocratic power. Republican factionalism is not new but unlike years past, it is now much more ideologically based than personality based.

Republican Minority Leader James R. Mann of Illinois, Cannon's protégé and author of the “white slavery” Mann Act was denied the speakership in 1919 when Republicans regained control of the House in the 1918 election. Instead of Mann, Republicans chose Judiciary Chair Frederick Gillett of Massachusetts but he too ran afoul of angry Republicans in 1923 when a number of more progressive Republicans voted for Martin Madden of Illinois rather than support Gillett's re-election as speaker. It would take nine ballots for Gillett to be re-elected and he scampered off to the Senate the following year.

Gillett's successor Republican Speaker Nicholas Longworth of Ohio gained control of the Republican conference in 1925 but he was one of 19 members who died before the 72nd Congress convened in December 1931 causing the Republicans to lose the House. His second-in-command John Q. Tilson of Connecticut failed to move up a notch to become Minority Leader. Rules Chair Bert Snell of New York won on the 8th ballot and yet another Republican crowned head was left on the chopping block. Snell oversaw the electoral evisceration of the House Republicans from 217 in 1931 to 89 in 1937 and left dejectedly to return to New York.

Joe Martin of Massachusetts held the top Republican job for twenty years, 1939-59 gaining the speakership in the 80th (1947-49) and 83rd (1953-55) Congresses. But he too would be felled by a restive band of Republicans smarting from their lopsided defeat in the 1958 midterm election. It was Minority Whip and second-in-command Charlie Halleck of Indiana who would end Martin's leadership. Six years later, Halleck fell victim as well when Conference Chair Gerald Ford overthrew Halleck in 1965 following Barry Goldwater's disastrous 1964 presidential campaign. Ford learned early that House Republicans distrust their leaders when he failed to replace long-time whip Les Arends of Illinois with Peter Frelinghuysen of New Jersey. Ford never again challenged his membership.

Ford left the House in 1973 replacing disgraced Vice President Spiro T. Agnew in the second Nixon Administration. Nixon saw Minority Leader Ford as “impeachment insurance” mistakenly believing that the House from whence all impeachments must arise may have loved Gerry Ford but would not see him as presidential enough to remove Nixon.

Wrong. Ford's successor Policy Committee chair John Rhodes of Arizona assumed the post late in December, 1973 and held it until 1981 when internal squabbles led him to peacefully relinquish the leadership to Republican Whip Bob Michel of Illinois, a protégé of Les Arends. Michel's long-time friendship with Democratic Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, Jr. of Massachusetts and his reluctance to engage in bitter partisan warfare with the Democrats led the more conservative and southern Republicans to plot his overthrow. After Republican Whip Dick Cheney of Wyoming left the House to become George HW Bush's Secretary of Defense in 1989, those younger Republicans produced an 87 to 85 victory for Newt Gingrich of Georgia over Michel's candidate Ed Madigan of Illinois. Sensing that he was being undermined, Bob Michel stepped aside and let Minority Whip Newt Gingrich and his agenda-driven associates take command of the Republican Conference in 1994 with their Contract for America. Bob Michel chose to jump rather than be pushed.

Eager to leave an imprint on the House, newly elected Speaker Gingrich abolished three House committees and renamed ten of the remaining nineteen. However his egocentric and bumptious style did not sit well with fellow Republicans and to avoid a party mutiny he resigned from the House in 1999. Before long all but one of Newt's ten renamed committees either returned to their pre-Newt names or took a non-Newt designation. While Gingrich's committee names did not have lasting effect his inflammatory GOPAC memo of 1996 continues its pernicious influence. That memo encouraged House Republicans to use the words “sick, cheat, corrupt, criminal, destroy, and even traitors” to describe their electoral foes, further poisoning the political well.

The leading candidate to replace scandal-plagued Gingrich in 1999 was Appropriations Chair Bob Livingston of Louisiana who was ensnared in a trap set by Hustler magazine publisher Larry Flynt who paid women to confess their illicit liaisons with Representatives who had voted to impeach President Bill Clinton for similar behaviors. Livingston left the House shortly afterward and replaced by Denny Hastert of Illinois. Hastert was the choice of the highly controversial Majority Whip Tom DeLay of Texas. When trouble besets House Republicans, they often turn to their heartland base of Illinois, “the land of Lincoln” to mollify their membership and calm troubled waters. Hastert obliged and served uneventfully (and unanimously) for eight years until Democrats regained the House in the 2006 election. Hastert gave up his leadership post and resigned the House in 2007 to become a lobbyist.

With Hastert's departure, former Conference Chair John Boehner of Ohio who had once been cast out of Gingrich's inner circle defeated

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Tom Delay's last surrogate, interim Majority Leader Roy Blunt of Missouri 122 to 109 on the second ballot in 2006. Now John wears the crown—one year as Majority Leader, four as Minority Leader and soon to be four as Speaker. He knows how uneasy the crown rests upon his

head and how quickly the band of Tea Party ideological amateurs will turn on him. He would be wise to look warily at those close to him who fit Shakespeare's depiction of the calculating Cassius who Julius Caesar rightfully mistrusted because of his "lean and hungry look."